

Chapter 1 - Life in Kent

In the Beginning...

John Nye was born on 12 July 1807 in the village of Leigh,^{1[1]} County Kent, England, the son of John Nye and Ann Randall. He had two older sisters, Anne and Sophia, and a younger brother, Thomas Cotton Nye. His family had lived for generations in the Tonbridge and Malling district, part of an area of southern England known as the Weald.

The word derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wald*, a forest, which in the sixteenth century was sometimes corrupted into 'wild,' and some authorities trace the name even further back to Andredsweald, a Jutish [name for] the Roman fort at Pevensey. What is certain is that it designated a tract of thick woodland that from primeval times filled in the basin between the North and South Downs...

When one speaks of a forest, it should not imply an impenetrable or totally uninhabited jungle... One must imagine it as a forest chiefly of oak and beech, with much fallen timber and an undergrowth of bramble and holly, which occasionally opened up into glades... At the stream crossings and in the Vale it would have been very marshy.

...By the mid-fourteenth century the Weald must have gained much of its present appearance, cultivated and hedged, leaving small woods or 'shaws' as reminders...

Nigel Nicolson,
Kent, p. 46-51
published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson,
London, 1988

The Weald was at one time the chief manufacturing district in England due to the large quantities of iron ore found as round nuggets in the clay earth, and also because of the number of sheep and the woollen mills that produced fine woven cloth. But the Industrial Revolution passed it by, the iron works and woollen mills moved north, and the Weald was left behind to revert to an agrarian economy.^{2[2]}

The village of Leigh is scarcely 5 miles from the principal town of Tonbridge,^{3[3]} which is dominated by the ruins of Tonbridge castle. Further south about 35 miles is the town of Hastings on the coast of the English Channel, where the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066 between the Saxon king of England and the invaders from France led by William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy.

It was in this same year of 1066 that construction on Tonbridge Castle commenced, taking more than 200 years to complete. As a youth, John Nye likely took frequent walks to Tonbridge, its markets and shops, and probably gazed in wonderment at the castle, imagining the knights in

1[1] Family records in possession of authors

2[2] Nigel Nicolson, *Kent*, p. 51-54

3[3] Until 1870 the name of the town was spelt Tunbridge, but following formation of a 'local Board District' it was officially spelt Tonbridge. [H.R. Pratt Boorman and Eric Maskell, *Tonbridge Free Press Centenary*, p. 35]

armour, the conquering forces, and the fear and cruelty which would have emanated from such a fortress during its days of might.

A view of the Tonbridge castle as it appears in the current era.
[From the book, *Tonbridge Free Press Centenary*]



Now there are but ruins, the fortifications having been dismantled and the stones used to build a manor. All that remains of the castle is the great gatehouse, a moat which is now filled with gardens, and the motte (artificial hill) built when the moat was excavated.

Tonbridge was the most important town in the district, and as such was the best place to find employment as a laborer. In the 1740s the channel of the river Medway was deepened and its banks were built up to allow commercial barges to ply the river and carry market produce from the Weald down to the wharfs at Maidstone. On their return to Tonbridge, the same barges carried goods from London or coal from the seagoing colliers which berthed at Maidstone.^{4[4]}

Despite the increase in trade, there were still many desperately poor people in the town, for whom the large workhouse was built in Bank Street... [in] 1733.

Religious dissent... was very strong in the town... The great majority of the townsfolk supported Parliament and were strongly Presbyterian, though there were also a number who belonged to other dissenting bodies.

In 1800 Tonbridge was still basically a small market town governed by the parish vestry, a stage for the horse-drawn traffic on the London to Hastings turnpike, and in essence little more than an overgrown village without any modern conveniences, health care, sewage disposal or decent housing for many of its citizens who, in consequence, suffered repeated epidemics of diseases now almost eliminated.

Ivan Green,
Tonbridge: A Pictorial History, p. 7-8 of introduction

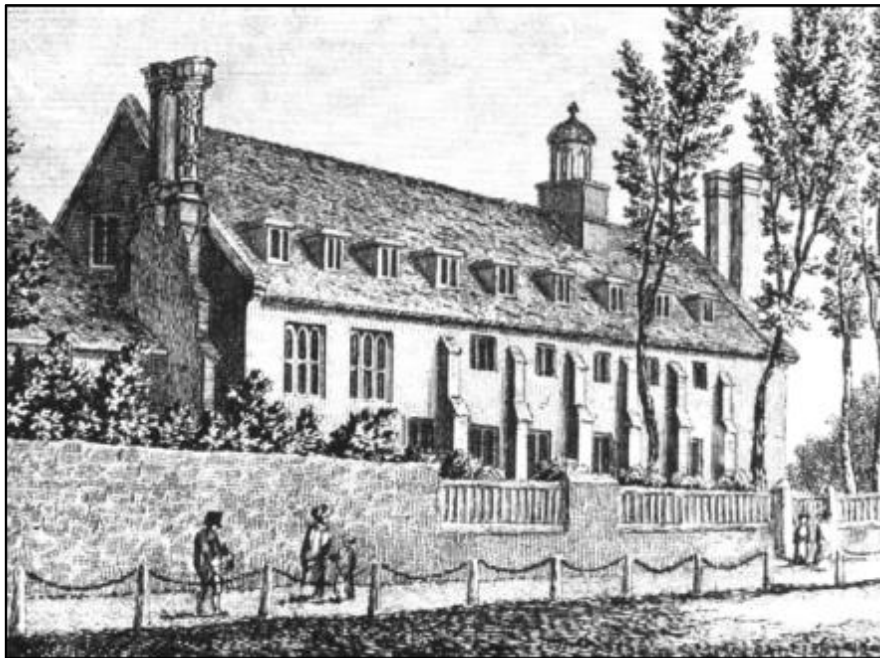
There are many records demonstrating that John Nye knew how to read and write, which suggest that he attended school as a boy. This was quite possibly the Judd Grammar School for boys, a small school in Tonbridge,

^{4[4]} Ivan Green, *Tonbridge: A Pictorial History*, p. 7 of introduction (Phillimore & Co. Ltd, Chichester, Sussex, 1990)

... catering principally for local boys until the early years of the 19th century, and it was housed in a simple two-storey rectangular building, though dormer windows in the roof indicate that the roof space was also used.

Ivan Green,
Tonbridge: A Pictorial History, p. 9 of Introduction

A sketch of the Tonbridge grammar school
as it would have appeared in the early 1800s.
[Plate 106 from the book, *Tonbridge: A Pictorial History*]



Attending school would
have been a major sacrifice, as a leaflet dated approximately 1845 shows that fees for the school

were £2 per term of three months for boys up to the age of 12, and older boys paid 1/3 more.^{5[5]} This was the equivalent of a month's wages.^{6[6]} It is possible that John's parents paid his school fees, but it is just as likely that John had to earn the money himself, accustomed as he was to labor.

"These Fees are inclusive of all charges for Books, Stationery, Games, Library, and Carpentry Tools," reads the leaflet. It also offers dining accomodation "for boys coming from a distance," but as John lived only five miles away in nearby Leigh, he would have gone home for meals.

School was of course secondary to work. John would have begun working in the fields as a child. When he was young, his parents would take he and his sisters, Anne and Sophia, and his little brother Thomas out into the hop gardens during harvest.^{7[7]} Then it was like a holiday, frolicking among the bines and the poles, hiding behind the dark green growth until he was scolded, then dutifully picking the hop cones until someone started throwing them at him, when he would answer back with a volley of the hard, yellow-green fruit.

When the bushel baskets were full, his father, John Nye Sr., would carry the heavy harvest to the horse-drawn dray at the end of the field, where the master would record the family's pickings, then heft it over the side and dump it into the cart.

With hundreds of families coming to Kent for the harvest, the wagons would soon be filled, and the horses would take the load to the oast house, or kiln, where the hops were dried. The great oast houses stood like eerie vultures over the fields, with rows of pyramid-shaped roofs to draw the heat upward where it escaped through white cowls which perched atop the roof and turned with the wind.

Always the centre of hop growing in Kent, the Tonbridge area has seen many changes over the past century. Hordes of Londoners used to travel to the town and district in all sorts of transport. Some came on foot, many by horse and cart and even by donkey...

Hop-pickers descended on the town in their tens of thousands... Arriving at their destinations they were housed in tents, huts, bivouacs or anything that would provide a covering. The picking season in August and September would provide an enjoyable holiday, as well as pocket money for these cheerful Cockneys.

Publicans used to erect special roadside shacks adjoining their pubs for serving drinks and had special tankards fixed by long chains, to stop the inevitable thefts of drinking pots.

Hygiene was of little consequence until the turn of the [20th] century when legislation was brought in to improve the lot of the pickers.

Police Courts were kept busy dealing with illegal activities of the law breakers, and reports in the [Tonbridge] *Free Press* at that time show that the invaders often helped themselves to the farmer's stock, or "went in search of conies" (rabbits).

^{5[5]} Leaflet shown as plate 122 in *Tonbridge: A Pictorial History*

^{6[6]} *Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye* states the average wages for farm labor was 7 or 8 shillings per week.

^{7[7]} *Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye* records John's children performing this work, which suggests that John did likewise as a child.

As John grew older, work in the fields was no longer considered a holiday. In the spring, there were yellow fields of rape (or turnips) whose leaves would be harvested and fed to the sheep and hogs, and the roots packed off to market.^{8[8]} Often, after a long, cold winter, his mother would send him out to the rape fields to try to glean a few turnips to put into the stew with the remains of a rabbit.

In the summer, there were fields of corn, chiefly wheat and barley, to be patiently reaped with long strokes of the sickle, stacked to dry, then threshed in the farmers' barns. As the summer began growing cool, there was fruit to be picked in the orchards, hazels and chestnuts to be gathered, and vegetables to be harvested.

Spring and summer were the good times, when there was plenty of work and plenty to eat. The valley of the river Medway was rich in its abundance,

... not just for its hop gardens but for its orchards of apples, pears, plums, cherries and filberts, and it remains today the loveliest stretch of countryside in Kent, with ...medieval stone bridges that span the river at intervals, and country houses ...which add a Poussinesque effect to this most English of scenes.

... the fields have kept their hedges, and so frequent are the intervening spinneys [thickets] and hedgerow trees that you might think the country heavily wooded until you see it from the air, when the intensity of its cultivation is obvious. The farms are small in acreage and frequent, but the buildings so hug the ground or hide between spinneys that in summer I can see from here scarcely one of them in the eight-mile Vale, and none that did not exist three hundred years ago.

Nigel Nicolson,
Kent, p. 69, 65-66

But fall and winter were the hardest. After the hop gardens were picked clean in September, it was a matter of finding what work you could, or simply finding something to eat. John Nye's family was poor, thus he had no horses and couldn't plow the fields. Instead he would help with the fall plantings, or cut timber for fence palings and firewood. At times he might find employment shovelling the sooty anthracite coal which stoked the warm furnaces of the great manors, or felling giant oak trees to be cut into beams for building great manors or ships for the Navy.

It took two thousand prime oaks to construct one large ship. Vast trunks were hauled out of the Weald to the Chatham yards. [Daniel] Defoe in 1720 wrote, 'the timber I saw was prodigious, as well in quantity as in bigness, and sometimes I have seen one tree on a carriage drawn by twenty-two oxen, and even then it is carried so little a way, and then thrown down, and left for other tugs to take up and carry on, that sometimes it is two or three years before it gets to Chatham, for sometimes a whole summer is not dry enough to make the roads passable'

Still, the oaks survive supreme everywhere, often of stupendous size and age ...but more often they are found as standards in a coppice of hazel or sweet chestnut which is cut for palings in a rotation of every twelve years or so...

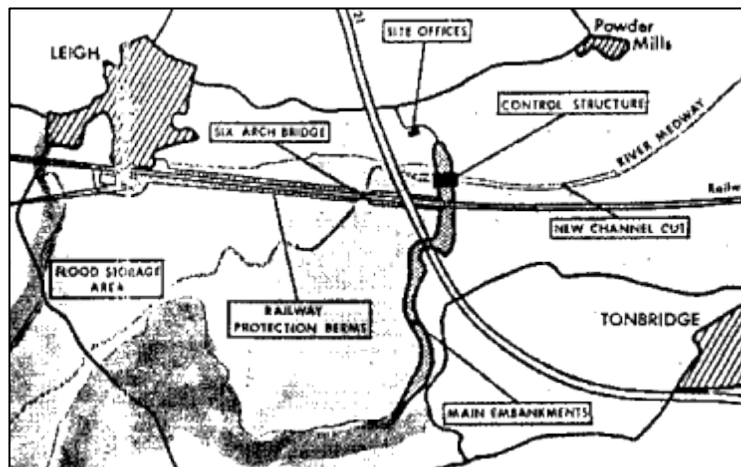
Nigel Nicolson,

^{8[8]} *Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye* states that John performed farm labor or any other kind of common labor he could obtain.

There was also work to be had at the gun powder mills situated between Leigh and Tonbridge, but the work there was tedious and dangerous.

...at Old Forge Farm, which was an iron foundry in Queen Elizabeth's time, there was a mill used 'for the manufacturing of that sort of gunpowder, usually called battle gunpowder ... in 1763 an act passed to enable the proprietors to continue to work the mill as a pestle mill, which is otherwise prohibited by law.'

Ivan Green,
Tonbridge: A Pictorial History, p. 8 of Introduction



Map of the Tonbridge flood storage area showing the powder mill in relation to the towns of Leigh and Tonbridge.

[Plate 145 from the book, *Tonbridge: A Pictorial History*]

John spent his days not in factories or mills, but outdoors. There were many sheep in the district, and as he grew older he often worked the flocks through the cold, wet winter months and into the spring lambing season, after which he would go again for the better money available in the fields. Thus the years passed.

Marriage of John and Charlotte Nye

Sometime about 1834, John became acquainted with a young lady by the name of Charlotte Osborne. He was now 27 years old, strong and well-built after many years of labor, and certainly must have appeared handsome to Charlotte, who was barely 17. It is likely that they met shortly after the death of Charlotte's father.

Charlotte Emline Osborne was born either at Tunbridge Wells^{9[9]} or Leigh, Kent, on 11 February 1817 to Rueben Osborne and Charlotte Hesmer.^{10[10]} It is said that Rueben Osborne was a descendant of King Henry VIII and King George III, and that his ancestors established Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, where Queen Victoria once lived.^{11[11]}

Though descended from royalty, all traces of aristocracy had long since disappeared in the immediate family. Rueben Osborne was a common laborer, and worked at the gun powder mills near Tonbridge. Sometime in 1834 there was an accident at the mills and he was killed. This is recorded many years later by his grandson, Ephraim Nye, who wrote:

On Saturday, June 3rd [1882], with a pleasant goodbye to all, I started for the powder mills near Leigh and found Aunt Amelia, Mother's sister, in a hop garden tending hops. She was at the time about 67 years of age. As I told her who I was surprise and gladness seemed manifest in her countenance, then she turned away and taking up her apron wiped away a silent tear. She then asked me home and to the house where her Father and Mother lived at the time her Father was blown up and killed by these same powder mills in 1834.

Aunt's oldest son George Ford conducted me around and through the powder mills. Showed me where Grandfather Osborne was picked up when killed by the explosion of the corning house.

Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye,
available from the Harold B. Lee Library
at Brigham Young University (call no. MSS 358)

Shortly after this fatal accident, John Nye and Charlotte Osborne were married. The ceremony was conducted on 2 November 1834 in the Church of England at the town of Watlingbury, about 9 miles (15 km) northeast of Tonbridge, by Robert Earle.

While it is not known all who were present at the wedding, there were at least some family members in attendance, as John's brother and sister, Thomas and Sophia Nye, signed the marriage certificate as witnesses.

^{9[9]} Family records in possession of authors show Charlotte was born at Tunbridge Wells, but the 1851 Census of Tonbridge (enumeration district 2B, p.17) and the Birth Certificate of Osborne Nye (Victoria Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1854, #2692) both show she was born in Leigh.

^{10[10]} In the *Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye*, he records visiting with Charlotte's cousin whom he twice referred to as "Ephraim Haysman (or Hesmer)." The surname is also found spelt "Hessman" or "Hessiman."

^{11[11]} *Genealogy of the Nye Family*, Volume II. Published by the Nye Family Association, Massachusetts, 1965.

Marriage certificate of John and Charlotte Nye (computer enhanced)
 From 1813-1833 Parish Records of Watlington, Church of England
 (copy located in LDS Family History Library, microfilm # 0995259, item 5 p.16)

| | |
|---|---|
| <u>John Nye</u> | of <u>this</u> Parish |
| <u>Barbours</u> | |
| and <u>Charlotte Osborne</u> | of <u>this</u> Parish |
| <u>Spurston</u> | |
| were married in this Church by <u>Sarnard</u> | |
| | this <u>second</u> Day of |
| <u>November</u> | in the Year One Thousand eight hundred and <u>thirty four</u> |
| By me <u>Robert Earle</u> | |
| This Marriage was solemnized between us { <u>John Nye</u> | |
| { <u>Charlotte Osborne</u> | |
| In the Presence of { <u>John Nye</u> | |
| { <u>Robert Nye</u> | |
| No. 47. | |

John and

Charlotte Nye apparently moved to Tonbridge after they were married. It was here that their first child, John Sylvestus Nye, was born on 28 October 1835.^{12[12]} There was work to be obtained in Tonbridge, and yet the conditions were difficult.

The population increased and... the area south of the river... became increasingly crowded with poor, small houses huddled together far too closely, accomodating the rapid numbers of working people. There the conditions became very unsatisfactory, with no adequate sewage disposal or water supplies except from frequently polluted wells close by.

In consequence, there was much illness and indeed major epidemics occurred. There were serious outbreaks of smallpox in 1832, 1838, 1853 and 1878, and of cholera in 1832, 1834, 1838 and 1854. Outbreaks of less virulent diseases such as diptheria and the more common, if less lethal, diseases were also very frequent.

The town's many problems were insoluble because of the ancient system of local government in Tonbridge, as in other places, was vested in the parish, a system which worked reasonably well in small medieval communities but was totally inadequate for the running of an emerging 19th-century town.

Ivan Green,
Tonbridge: A Pictorial History, p. 9 of Introduction

It appears that John and Charlotte Nye performed itinerant labor, moving about from place to place in search for work. Their second child, Emma, was born in London on 28 September 1837, suggesting that Charlotte had been working in the city as a domestic servant before Emma was born.

^{12[12]} The following birth dates and locations for the children of John and Charlotte Nye are from family records in possession of authors, and confirmed in the 1851 Census of Tonbridge

We next find them 90 miles (150 km) west of Tonbridge in the county of Wiltshire, where their son James Nye was born on 21 April 1840. Two and a half years later they were back in Tonbridge, where Charlotte gave birth to Charles Ashton Nye. Then again they moved to Ashford, 30 miles (50 km) east, where we find the birth of their fifth child, Ephraim Hesmer Nye. By 1849 they were back near Tonbridge, where Stephen William Nye was brought into the world.

In summary, the movements of John and Charlotte Nye were frequent and wide-ranging, but always seemed to center around their home town of Tonbridge:

- • 3 Nov 1834, married in Watlington, about 9 miles (15 km) NE of Tonbridge
- • 28 Oct 1835, first child, John Nye, born in Tonbridge
- • 28 Sep 1837, Emma Nye born in London
- • 21 April 1840, James Nye born at Christian Molford, 13[13] in the county of Wiltshire, 90 miles (150 km) west of Tonbridge
- • 17 Dec 1842, Charles Ashton Nye born in Tonbridge
- • 6 August 1845, Ephraim Hesmer Nye born in Ashford, 30 miles (50 km) E of Tonbridge
- • 21 Feb 1849, Stephen William Nye born in Hadlow, 3 miles (5 km) NE of Tonbridge

Working Conditions

It is an understatement to say that life in Britain was difficult for the working man during the time that John and Charlotte were raising their family. Queen Victoria was crowned in 1837 at the age of 18, and the Prime Minister of the day was Lord Melbourne, both yet to be immortalized by having their names affixed to a new colony in Australia. The population of England and Wales doubled between 1801 and 1841, burgeoning from 8.9 million people to 15.9 million,^{14[14]} and the industrial revolution led to mass migration of workers from the starvation wages of the fields into the sweatshop slavery conditions of the factories.

Wages were low, and the price of bread was kept very high by the *Corn Laws*, which prevented foreign corn [grain] being brought into the country, because of the heavy duty imposed upon it. Some extreme men started an agitation for what was called the *People's Charter*. They were therefore called chartists. They asked for further reform of Parliament, and insisted that every man should have a vote, and that Parliament should be elected by secret ballot every year.

T.F. Tout,
A History of Great Britain, p. 382
Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1934

The affect of the Corn Laws was to make the price of bread almost unaffordable for the laborer, reducing many to poor diets and to stealing bread. According to the following text, the inhabitants of English villages suffered as former domestic industries--such as brewing, milling,

^{13[13]} *History of Idaho* by Hiram T. French, 1914, pg. 1092. Also in the 1851 Tonbridge Census.

^{14[14]} *Concise History of the World*, Universal Text Books Ltd, London (1935), p. 594

tanning, wagon building, carpentry, boot making, basket weaving, and firing of pottery--moved from the villages into urban factories.

The rise of the factory system made the village once more purely agricultural, and with the crafts went the system of apprenticeship that was usually the only education available... as one authority says: "The monotony of village life in the nineteenth century was due mainly to the migration of the industries to the urban districts, which eventually was more complete in England than in any other country of Europe."

Concise History of the World, p. 595
Universal Text Books Ltd, London, 1935

The discontent and reforms of the day led to Lord Melbourne's resignation in 1841, and a new Prime Minister was empowered, Sir Robert Peel, whose ministry coincided with the "hungry forties."¹⁵[15] But conditions changed slowly, if at all. In 1843, author Thomas Carlyle wrote,

I will venture to believe that in no time since the beginning of society was the lot of those same dumb millions of toilers so entirely unbearable as it is even in the days now passing over us. It is not to die, or even to die of hunger, that makes a man wretched; many men have died: all men must die--the last exit of all is in a fire chariot of pain. But it is to live miserable, we know not why; to work sore and yet gain nothing; to be heart-worn, weary, yet isolated, unrelated, girt-in with a cold, universal laissez-faire; it is to die slowly all our life long, imprisoned in a deaf, dead, infinite injustice, as in the accursed iron belly of a Phalaris bull.

Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*,
as quoted in *Concise History of the World*, p. 594

Peel sympathized with the poor and, following the Irish potato famine in 1845, he abolished the Corn Laws, allowing cheap grain to be imported and dropping the price of bread to reasonable levels.

Under such circumstances John Nye struggled to raise his family. It is little wonder then that he travelled about for work, taking employment wherever it was available, but always returning to Tonbridge, the place he knew as home.

The Family Home in Hadlow

The last known residence of John and Charlotte Nye in England was at the tiny village of Hadlow, scarcely 3 miles (5 km) from Tonbridge. Here they must have lived for three or four years, at least from the time Stephen was born in February 1849 to their departure for Australia in July 1852. Many years later, Ephraim Nye returned to England as a missionary and described visiting his childhood home.

May 31 [1882], Wednesday. Walked to Hadlow, 11 miles. Here is where I went to school in my infancy. Visited the old school and play ground, which with all its surroundings in the village had not changed since I saw it last 30 years ago. I started along by the same old path across the fields that I walked in childhood to Stallions Green. Visited the old house where we lived prior to our departure for Australia.

¹⁵[15] Novels reflecting the times include Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (published in 1837-38) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (published under the pen name Currer Bell), and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (published using the pseudonym of Ellis Bell).

The quaint old house, the walk leading up to the back of the lot, the stack of green faggots there, the garden, even the very plum trees I used to climb and slyly snip a tempting plum, the lane in front, and the fields as they stretched away in the distance, formed a picture which, photographed upon the tablets of my mind in childhood, had remained in all the changing scenes of life through which I had passed, now lay before me unchanged.

The Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye

Stallions Green is the name of the estate on which the Nye family were tenant workers. It is on a twisting, turning lane about 5 miles from Tonbridge, and there are about six homes in the area, one or two of which looked fairly old. When we visited in 1999, we walked up the drive to one house and talked to an owner who knew little about the history, only that it was an estate 150 years ago where the land owner lived in a large main house and the agricultural laborers lived in the other homes. It wasn't possible to identify in which house the Nyes resided, though the fields and the public path across the farms are still there and in use.

In the 1851 census of Tonbridge, Enumeration District #2B, p.17, we find the following record:

Stallions Green

| | | | | | |
|-----------|------|----------|-------------|---------------|----------------------|
| John Nye | head | 43 | ag. laborer | born in Leigh | |
| Charlotte | wife | | 35 | | Leigh |
| Emma | | daughter | 13 | | St. Mary's Middlesex |
| James | | son | 10 | scholar | Wiltshire Xn Malford |
| Charles | | son | 8 | scholar | Tonbridge |
| Ephraim | | son | 5 | | Ashford |
| Stephen | | son | 2 | | Hadlow |

This census gives us more precisely where Emma was born in London, as well as where James was born in Wiltshire. However, it contradicts family records which state that Charlotte was born in Tunbridge Wells, not Leigh.

The 1851 Tonbridge census also omits their oldest child, John Sylvestus Nye, but for good reason. We find that he has been included in the 1851 Hadlow census, where he was apparently living and working with his grandparents. Teenagers often were sent out to work for friends or family members as soon as they were able.

West side of the turnpike at 92 Higham Street

| | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|--|
| John Ney | married | age 67 | farmer, employer of 4 laborers and 2 boys, born at Leigh |
| wife Anne | | | age 66 farmers wife born at Penshurst |
| daughter Anne | unmarried | 37 | born at Hadlow |
| daughter Sophia | unmarried | 34 | born at Hadlow |
| grandson John Ney | | age 15 | born at Tunbridge |

The probable reason for the misspelling of the name as "Ney" was that most people, including the census taker, spelled words as they sounded. The name Nye has also been found as Nie and Nigh.



The Nye home at 92 Higham Street, Tonbridge.
Photo by Michael C. Bouy, 1999

This home still stands in Tonbridge, and was visited by the author in 1999. It is a dual-occupancy, two-story brick home with a white-washed stucco exterior. The Nyes lived in the left side of the home, which is 92 Higham Street. We walked to the door and knocked, but no one was home, so we took photos and visited with the neighbors who lived in the other half of the house. They were an elderly couple who remembered well when Higham Lane was still a country road and the house was surrounded by fields and farms. Now it is in the heart of a large subdivision of hundreds of houses.

John Nye Sr. must have been reasonably prosperous to have his own farm and employ six laborers, apparently working his way into the position of having his own farm. The typical tenant farmer of the day leased a portion of a nobleman's or squire's estate and brought in laborers to work the fields.

Under this system the landowners grew rich and the tenant-farmers prospered. Many of the great houses of the nobility...were built, rebuilt or enlarged at the time, and many of the old manor houses were replaced by a much more pretentious building called a hall.

Concise History of the World, p. 595-6

British author William Cobbett wrote a number of articles in the 1820s and 30s (later assembled in a volume called *Rural Rides*) about economic conditions and expressed anger "at the

increased prosperity of the farmer, who drives a gig to market, has wine on his table, and a piano in his parlour.”¹⁶[16]

Thus we can imagine that to help his struggling son, the senior John Nye brought his grandson to work on his farm. He and his wife both died shortly after John and Charlotte took their family to Australia.

John Nye Sr. was born on 16 January 1783 and died in Hadlow on 1 May 1853 at the comparatively old age of 70.¹⁷[17]

His wife Ann Randall Nye was born on 1 August 1784, and while the date of her death is not yet known, it must have been near the same time as that of her husband.

“The Strict Baptist chapel in Pembury Road was built by the prolific Tonbridge builder, George Punnett, in 1867.”
Ivan Green, *Tonbridge: A Pictorial History*, plate 102

¹⁶[16] *Concise History of the World*, Universal Text Books Ltd, London (1935), p. 596

¹⁷[17] Family records in possession of the authors



On his death, John Nye Sr. left all that he owned to his two spinster daughters, Anne and Sophia, and to his son Thomas, which apparently consisted mostly of the farm and a little money.

Anne and Sophia were members of the Strict Baptist Church in Tonbridge. In 1866, they pledged to the church that if they had a bountiful harvest of hops that year, they would donate the surplus income toward the construction of a chapel for the Baptist faith in Tonbridge.^{18[17a]}

Perhaps by miracle, the Nyes indeed had an especially great harvest. True to their word, they donated to the church an amount sufficient to build a large, solid brick chapel which stands today in excellent condition.

The construction of this chapel is mentioned in the book, *Tonbridge Free Press Centenary*, which states that in 1858 the local Baptist congregation was formed and shortly afterward,

Two sisters, the Misses Anne and Sophia Nye, of Winchester Farm, Tonbridge, provided the finance for the first Baptist Church, Zion Chapel, opened in 1867.

H.R. Pratt Boorman,
Tonbridge Free Press Centenary, p. 49

During our visit in 1999, we drove to Pembury Road on the south side of Tonbridge and easily found Zion's Baptist Church. The doors were locked, so I went to the house next door to make an inquiry, which happened to be the home of the Baptist Pastor, Tim Fields. I explained to the young Pastor that I was a descendent of the Nye family and hoped to see the inside of the church, and he was excited to meet me.

^{18[17a]} From conversation with and records received from Pastor Tim Fields, Zion Baptist Church, June 1999

On the east side of the exterior there is a small foundation stone which bears the following inscription:

**ANN & SOPHIA NYE
FOUNDERS OF THIS BUILDING
TO BE FOR STRICT BAPTIST CONGREGATIONS FOR EVER
THIS STONE WAS LAID (unreadable date) 1867
THE LORD GOD OMNIPOTENT REIGNETH**

The inside of the chapel is more wide than deep, with room for about six rows of pews, and a balcony in the rear of the chapel holds another three rows, sufficient for a congregation of about 200 followers. The ceiling is easily 30 feet high, with plain candelabras suspended for lighting. In the rear are two or three rooms which can be used for classes or meetings. After the tour and photos, Pastor Fields thanked us appreciatively for coming to visit, as he was keen to meet some of the descendents of the original Nye family.

When an older son left for a new beginning in a new world, the custom was that the son left at home received both shares. Therefore John and Charlotte were not provided for under the terms of the will of John Nye Sr. However Anne and Sophia were provided for, probably because neither ever married and their father wanted to ensure they were taken care of. It appears that Anne and Sophia were rather liberal in squandering their money. When Ephraim Nye returned to England in 1882, he sought them out,

...seeing an old man breaking stone on the road [I] inquired for the Winchester farm and for the Nyes. He said that Uncle Thom and Aunt Sophia were dead and that Aunt Anne was at the Budd Farm, about 5 miles distant near Shipbourne, so I proceeded on and reaching the place found her sick in bed.

Aunt Anne was living with an old farmer by the name of Furmer, whose wife takes care of her. She has been confined to bed about a year, it was supposed she had money and that the old man with whom she lived hoped she would drop off and leave him what she had. I talked with her about an hour and then withdrew. The family kindly invited me to stay all night, and I did so.

June 1st [1882], Thursday. Visited Aunt Anne about 9 a.m. and chatted for some time on family matters and the Gospel. She did not however desire to hear the Gospel, so I bid her goodbye. From what I could learn she had for years been a confirmed drunkard. Her whole appearance is strongly indicative of the past. A bottle of brandy stood on the table by her and she asked me to take a drink in good old Topper style. 'Tis perhaps needless to say I declined.

Wednesday, December 13th. I received a letter from Aunt Mary Ann Nye stating that Aunt Anne Nye died December 3, 1882. Aunt Mary desired me to come to Maidstone. Accordingly I went and with her went to Budd Farm at Shipbourne, where Aunt Anne died but the old man Furmer with whom Aunt had lived would not tell us anything about her nor let us see any of her things. The truth was she had left considerable property and the old man had secured it to himself and was afraid of an investigation. So we returned, she to Maidstone, I to Tonbridge, and put up with Brother Ford. During the evening Brother Ford took me out to see Mother's cousin Ephraim Hesmer, and I took his genealogy.

Saturday, 16th. I went and saw Aunt Anne's lawyer, a Mr. Harris, but found that nothing could be done in the matter so gave it up.

Family Record of Ephraim Hesmer Nye

We can surmise that it was the Winchester Farm which was leased by John Nye Sr. If this is correct, the 1851 census places Winchester Farm at 92 Higham Street, Hadlow.

The Decision to Leave

When Sir Robert Peel abolished the Corn Laws in 1846, the plight of the ordinary working man such as John Nye improved considerably. It is said that such men "...became less discontented, as [they were] now winning higher wages and living on better food."¹⁹[18] But times remained difficult.

Just as their parents had done, John and Charlotte managed to send their children to school. This is reflected in the 1851 Tonbridge census where it shows James and Charles as scholars, and in the biography of Charles Ashton Nye where we read:

When old enough he went to school, all the schooling he had was before he was nine years old...

Lucinda Charlottie Nye Duke Pearce
Charles Ashton Nye, biography (1957)
copy in possession of authors

In the *History of Idaho*²⁰[19] it is said that James taught school on board the ship to Australia. James would have only been 12 years old at the time, which shows that he must have been a very good student, and that he had indeed received a formal education in England.

Today we can hardly comprehend the sacrifices John and Charlotte made to send their children to school while they barely had enough to eat, but such times were forever etched into the memory of Ephraim Nye, who later recalled:

Father followed the avocation of farm laborer or any other kind of common labor he could get to do, which was always poorly paid, the average wages for such work not exceeding seven or eight shillings per week (\$2.00)²¹[20] and the supply of unskilled labor far exceeding the demand.

Idleness was the result from one half to two thirds of the time. The consequent suffering in the very dregs of poverty of the family, even within my own recollection, were terrible. At harvest time Mother would take all the children who were large enough and go out into the field, in common with others, and reap by hand with the sickle, the mode of harvesting at that time, or into the bean field and pull and tie up beans by the acre, or at other times she would go into the hopfields (or gardens) with hundreds of others and pick hops during the season with as many of the children as were old enough to assist.

Such are some of the recollections of my childhood days. I must say, they are not very pleasant for with all this it was a continual struggle for my parents to keep the wolf from the door, and this was the prospect before them when the gold mines of Australia were discovered about the year 1851-52.

¹⁹[18] T.F. Tout, *A History of Great Britain*, p. 388

²⁰[19] *History of Idaho* by Hiram T. French, Lewis Publishing Co., 1914, p. 1092

²¹[20] This value is according to Ephraim's reckoning in 1896. Therefore, a shilling equates to 25 cents.

The 1851 discovery of gold in Australia, combined with the bonus of government-assisted passage, proved to be an incredible lure for John and Charlotte Nye. After years of moving and travelling in search for work, it was not a difficult decision to take their family and move to Australia.

Only one thing stood in their way: earning sufficient money to pay their share of the passage on a voyage which would prove to be a harrowing and deadly experience.
